WHISKEY WHISKEY PAPA: Highest Flier in the High Arctic

Lawrence Elliott

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WHISKEY WHISKEY PAPA:

Highest Flier in the High Arctic

Undaunted by fierce weather and hostile terrain, Weldy Phipps and his airline are opening the North

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By Lawrence Elliott

The world of Weldy Phipps centers on a gravel airstrip and a cluster of lonely red barracks buildings known as Resolute Bay. It reaches out over a million square miles of Canada's Northwest Territories, across ice-burdened seas and barren, uncharted islands, its ferocity certified by place names like Glacier Strait and Bay of God's Mercy. You could call Weldy a bush pilot except that Resolute, five jet hours north of Montreal, 550 miles north of the

Arctic Circle, is a long way from anything that grows as tall as a bush.

Absolutely dependent on the airplane, the region assails pilots with 100-m.p.h. winds, 24-hour nights and 60-below-zero temperatures. Magnetic compasses spin uselessly under the pull of the North Magnetic Pole, 100 miles from Resolute, and atmospheric conditions can black out radio reception for days.

Here, Atlas Aviation Ltd. provides the only regular year-round flying service, and Welland Wilfred Phipps – whose initials make him Whiskey Whiskey Papa in radio code – is president, senior pilot and chief mechanic. From the main Northwest Territories base at Frobisher Bay to the northernmost weather station at Alert, Weldy Phipps is rated the best flier in the Arctic.

The events of one day last spring show why. An F-27 with 13 passengers aboard, low on gas became hopelessly lost in a slashing snowstorm on the approach to Resolute. "We could all hear the pilot on the radio," Jack Austin, an Atlas man, recalled. "He was in a real sweat. Then we didn't hear anything at all and after ten minutes Weldy said, 'He's down.' With that, he puts on his parka and takes off in the single-engine Otter."

Flying 20 feet above the rugged hills of Cornwallis Island, Weldy somehow spotted the tail section of the downed F-27 and made six passes before he found a spot to land. He ran for the wreck to find passengers and crew, all dazed and two badly hurt, striking out on foot for Resolute – in the wrong direction, a fatal mistake in this unforgiving land. Weldy flagged them down, then flew the two injured men in, returning for the others in the Twin Otter.

A reticent, crew-cut, barrel-chested man of 48, Weldy will land an aircraft on virtually anything short of a mountain peak. Result: in 17 years and 17,000 flying hours in the North, he has made more landings on what is generously called unprepared ground – beaches, ice floes, hilltops – than any other living pilot.

On any given day, he may have nine pilots and some $2 million worth of airplanes scattered across the high Arctic – ferrying mail, movies and civil servants to the Eskimo settlements, airlifting expectant mothers to hospitals or cub scouts to jamborees, carrying drilling gear for oil survey teams, supplies to far-flung polar expeditions.

He has flown food to stranded explorers, parts to damaged airplanes, plucked downed pilots off drifting ice and rescued any number of reckless adventurers. Not long ago, three Englishmen set out to ski to the North Pole. They disappeared without trace for three weeks and were near death when Weldy finally found them on tiny

Ward Hunt Island, 500 miles short of their goal.

Mrs. Phipps. In the ten-by-twelve shack that serves as the Atlas operations office, a radio chatters away – "Hello, Fran, this is Pond Inlet. Our tractor motor's broken down. Do you have anybody coming this way?" – and outbound passengers mill nervously around teetering stacks of mail and cargo. In the center of it all is a slender and strikingly attractive blonde. Imperturbable, she sits at a beat-up old desk and writes tickets, calculates payloads for the manifest and – first priority – tends the radio: "Yes, Pond Inlet, it's Fran here. Dick DeBlicquy says he'll be there in an hour. Roger, Roger."

When the outbound flight has finally taxied out for takeoff, she throws a parka around her shoulders and runs 200 yards down the airstrip, through the snow and the stinging wind, to a complex of house trailers. This is where she lives, as do all Atlas hands. Five of her eight children live here, too – the three eldest are "outside," away at school – and it is time for their lunch. She is Mrs. Weldy Phipps, and besides looking after Atlas ground operations and the care and feeding of all the Atlas "family," she and Weldy are raising a substantial and close-knit family of their own.

There are many who hold that the Phipps are leading the way in the awakening of this fierce and infinitely promising land. Says an oil geologist: "There's oil and all kinds of minerals up here. But how do you find them? Dogsled's too slow, helicopters too expensive. Then along comes Weldy and puts you and your equipment down within half a mile of where you wanted to be and you're in business." Says an area administrator: "With regular service into every Eskimo settlement and weather station, winter and summer, teachers, nurses, technicians and their families aren't afraid to come up here anymore. You have to thank Weldy for that."

Weldy Wheel. Weldy, who was born in Ottawa in 1922, settled on a flying career as a boy, and the local airport became his headquarters and haven. When he was barely 18, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and was shipped off to England soon after the outbreak of World War II. He was a flight engineer craving pilot training when, in April 1943, his Halifax bomber was crippled in a raid and he had to bail out over Germany. He spent 15 months in a prisoner-of-war camp before, as he puts it, "another chap and I got away," thus casually covering the deadly dangerous days until he finally made his way back to England.

Back in Canada after the war he quickly won a commercial license. Supporting himself by barnstorming and parachute-jumping at fairs

all over Ontario, he learned all there was to know about the whole wide range of airplanes that he rented, borrowed and bought. He also gave flying lessons and acquired one student named Frances whose blond good looks impressed him more forcefully than her aptitude as a pilot. "We weren't getting anywhere," Weldy recalls, "until finally I said, 'Listen, why don't we get married and I'll do all the flying for the family.'"

Weldy, meanwhile, was being drawn irresistibly north. Working for Spartan Air Services out of Ottawa, he flew summer surveys and photographic missions in the sub-Arctic. More and more he was struck by the promise of light aircraft in opening the vast locked land. In 1953 he came up to Resolute and spent the summer flying prospectors and medical evacuations. The next two summers he was back, and crisscrossing endless miles of soggy but essentially flat tundra, Weldy fretted about being limited to a random handful of stony landing strips. It took him five years to work out that problem, but when he did the result was nothing short of a transformation in polar flying.

The secret was the redesigned undercarriage that came to be known as the Weldy Wheel – fat balloon tires a yard in diameter with only five pounds of air pressure. His trim little Super Cub could now land on any reasonably level surface the length of a football field – and take off in less – the great doughnut wheels riding easily over rocks and ice hummocks. Most important, on boggy tundra, the tires' uncommonly high flotation – they put barely four pounds of pressure per square inch on the fragile ground – enabled the plane to roll freely where a man would sink to his ankles.

Year-Round Flying. Between June and September 1958, Weldy flew two Department of Mines geologists on an Arctic survey during which they made 400 landings on unprepared terrain and mapped 30,000 square miles of mineral-rich territory. The following summer, there were seven Super Cubs probing the Canadian northland. The Arctic islands were open to commercial exploration, and the great oil rush was on.

The ultimate test of Weldy's oversized wheel – and his gifted audacity as a pilot – came in 1960. Back in Ottawa one November night, he was awakened by a call from a federal health officer: an epidemic of whooping cough was raging at Grise Fiord at the tip of Ellesmere Island, northernmost Eskimo settlement in the world. One child was already dead, and attempts to drop a paramedical team had been turned back by weather. Would Weldy try flying a doctor in? After taking a special flight to Resolute where his own plane was disassembled and stored for the

inter, Weldy toiled through four hours of sub-zero cold, refitting the Super Cub's wings, tail and balloon tires. Then, shivering in the unheated cabin, he and his passenger took off.

The Arctic night blanketed every landmark, but Mounties at Grise Fiord lit flares along what they hoped was an adequate landing stretch on adjacent sea ice. Three nerve-racking hours later, Weldy spotted the flares and swooped down for a look. What he saw was about 250 feet of lumpy ice and, at the end, a huge pressure ridge promising disaster. Hoping for the best, he plunged down and, brakes groaning, bounced to a safe halt in little more than 200 feet. A few days later, the epidemic was under control – and Weldy had decided that there was nothing to keep him from operating out of Resolute the year-round.

For his pioneering work in developing light aircraft to meet the rigors of polar flying, Weldy was awarded the historic McKee trophy, Canada's highest aviation honor, for 1961.

Next year, he organized Atlas Aviation Ltd., headquarters: Resolute Bay, N.W.T. When Fran came up for a summer visit, she was immediately captivated by the North and said to Weldy, "Why do I have to go back?"

"Only to get the kids and sell the house," he replied with a satisfied grin.

Fire and Beer. It was bitterly hard going at first. The Phipps went into debt to buy a twin-engine Beechcraft which, in those fierce winters, required 15 hours of preparation for every three hours in the air. Working on it in 56-below-zero temperatures, Weldy's fingers went numb with frostbite and thickened with blisters.

But business boomed. Weldy reinvested nearly every cent in new planes, new equipment, and gradually attracted pilots able to cope with the violence and vagaries of Arctic flying. Weldy is proud of them all, but perhaps a special corner of his heart is reserved for a young Eskimo from Resolute village named Markoosie* who started with Atlas as a mechanic's helper, but whose innate flying skills – and Weldy's encouragement – won him a commercial license two years ago.

The Atlas pilots earn up to $6000 a month during the summer rush. But they work for their money. Through the long nights, and when fog and storm shroud the land, they must steer a course by stars or sun, juggling sextant and astrocompass with one hand while flying with the other. In freezing drizzle, enough ice can quickly build up on their wings to force them down through the murk to a blind landing.

* Markoosie has since turned author and recently published his first book: "Harpoon of the Hunter," (McGill-Queen's University Press).

Not long ago, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, touring the Northwest Territories, asked Weldy to fly him to Grise Fiord. Trudeau, who has done some flying himself, sat in the copilot's seat as the Twin Otter homed in on the red cliffs of Ellesmere Island. Then, all at once they were aiming straight at a towering mountain. The Prime Minister's face went white and the newsmen in the cabin behind tightened their seat belts. In the last split second of safety, Weldy banked sharply, dropped the final 100 feet and set the Otter down on the tiny Grise Fiord strip, hewn from the rock at the very foot of the mountain. The newsmen broke into spontaneous applause, and Trudeau, smiling weakly, said, "I wouldn't try to park a Volkswagen on this strip."

It is hard to conceive of Resolute without Weldy Phipps. He is a natural community leader, a fact which voters in the High Arctic recognized last December when they elected him to the Council of the Northwest Territories. In times of crisis, his almost stoic calm provides a ready antidote. Not long ago, a nervous pilot, trying to land in a fog, missed the runway. Back up in the soup, he radioed that he was low on gas, couldn't see a thing and didn't know what to do. Somebody ran to the Arctic Circle Club to tell Weldy. "Tell him to swing out over Barrow Strait and turn due north," said Weldy. "I'm going to build him a fire he can see for 100 miles."

With that, he went off and found an RCAF truck loaded with seven drums of gasoline. At the end of the runway, he dumped the gas and lit it with a thrown wad of burning newspaper. Then he went back to the club.

Twenty minutes later the young pilot came to thank him. "If there is anything at all I can do for you. . . ."

"No, nothing for me," said Whiskey Whiskey Papa. "But you owe the Air Force for seven drums of high test."

All Systems Go

HOLD this rectangle to your face and blow on it. If it turns green, call your physician. If it turns brown, see your dentist. If it turns purple, see your psychiatrist. If it turns red, see your banker. If it turns black, call your lawyer and make a will.

If it remains the same color, you are in good health, and there is no reason on earth why you should not be in church next Sunday morning.

– From the parish bulletin of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Oceanside, N.Y.

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